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ABSTRACT

This study involved the selection and adaptation of a writing assessment procedure for teachers and researchers in the Duval County Public Schools (Florida) to use in assessing changes in writing ability among elementary grade students. Through a review of the literature, four writing assessment procedures (analytic, holistic, focused holistic, and primary trait) were identified. The primary trait scoring (PTS) system, a norm-referenced system developed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress, was selected and adapted to assess the quality of writing traits. Three writing traits (mode, organization, and mechanics/grammar) were measured. District test developers and language arts staff collaborated to develop a writing prompt for each grade level (two through five). Twenty-four classroom teachers and 690 students participated in the study. Results indicated that: (1) evaluators at the district level with assistance from other qualified personnel can select, adapt, and verify a writing procedure that is appropriate for use in both research and instruction; (2) a systematic procedure involving both school-based and district-level personnel can be employed to select and adapt a scoring system not only for a specific research undertaking but also for general use; and (3) the reliability and validity of the instrument can be confirmed through local research. Appendices include composition scoring guides and descriptive questions (writing prompts) for each grade level. (JAZ)

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SCORING WRITING SAMPLES IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: SELECTING AND DEVELOPING AN APPROPRIATE PROCEDURE FOR EVALUATING ELEMENTARY STUDENT WRITING

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SCORING WRITING SAMPLES IN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH: SELECTING AND DEVELOPING AN APPROPRIATE PROCEDURE FOR EVALUATING ELEMENTARY STUDENT WRITING

During the late summer of 1985 the Duval County School District in undertook a pilot study focusing on student writing in grades two through five. The study was designed to compare writing achievement of students using the county-adopted text with one which provided a greater emphasis on grammar instruction through writing production. As a part of the study, efforts were made to select and adapt a writing assessment procedure which could be used by both teachers and researchers in assessing changes in writing ability among elementary grade students. Thus, an assessment procedure was needed that would provide a basis for comparing the efficacy of two sets of text materials in improving student writing ability, and at the same time provide teachers with an assessment procedure which could be used to facilitate writing instruction at the elementary level.

A cursory review of available literature revealed that selecting or adapting a writing assessment procedure to be employed as a research tool, an instructional tool for teachers, and as an appropriate instrument for writing assessment at the elementary school level in a large school district would be no easy task. Based on review findings, four procedures emerged as worthy of consideration. These included analytic, holistic, focused holistic, and primary trait. Especially helpful in guiding the selection process were articles by Meredith and Williams (1984), Mullis (1984), and Cooper and Odell (1977).

Other helpful sources are provided in the reference section at the end of the paper.

Analytic scoring procedures provide specific diagnostic information about a student's writing. It is based on the premise that writing is made up of various features such as format, creativity, mechanics, and usage, each of which is scored separately. One advantage of this type of assessment is that it provides extensive feedback for both teachers and students. Another is that many teachers use variations of this type of scoring procedure and are comfortable with it. There are, however, several disadvantages associated with this scoring procedure when it comes to large-scale assessment: (1) there is limited agreement regarding the importance of subskills to be measured; (2) interrater reliability tends to be low; and (3) scoring is time consuming and costly (NAEP, 1978, 1980; White, 1985).

Holistic scoring, on the other hand, lends itself to applications requiring less detailed feedback by providing information about the range of overall writing ability of students. It provides the reader (i.e., scorer) with an opportunity to respond to the whole essay as opposed to the breaking down of its parts. In addition, this method provides a reliable ranking of essays if readers are adequately trained (NAEP, 1978, 1980). Finally, scoring (after training) is comparatively easy, inexpensive, and tends to meet the technical requirements of norm-reference testing (Cascone and Cullen,

1985). The major drawback to holistic scoring is that it does not provide for specific feedback.

Focused holistic scoring carries with it many of the positive aspects of holistic scoring plus the option to measure additional features such as main idea, supporting details, usage, and mechanics, thus providing for specific feedback (Texas Education Agency, 1980). The major drawback to this procedure is that like analytic scoring, interrater reliability tends to be low. According to White (1985), "There is as yet no agreement...about what, if any, separable subskills exist in writing...", thus, limiting the extent of agreement between raters. Finally, the analytic nature of the scoring process increases the time it takes to score/rate each writing sample.

The primary trait scoring (PTS) system emerged as the fourth method worthy of consideration. The PTS system was first developed by NAEP and used to rate papers for the second and third national writing assessments performed in 1973-1974 and 1978-1979. Like holistic scoring, PTS provides a reliable ranking of essays and tends to meet the technical requirement of norm-referenced testing. In addition, it allows for a more narrow focus than holistic scoring and provides for specific feedback regarding writing traits. The major drawback to this system is that papers are scored for one specific primary trait. Although other traits may be considered, they are scored at another sitting by different readers.

The writing assessment procedure eventually selected was first employed in a study designed to determine the impact of

grammar oriented language arts text materials on the writing ability of elementary school students (Cross and Hawk, 1986). This study involved the selection and adaptation of a writing assessment procedure for use by teachers and researchers in assessing changes in writing ability among elementary grade students and to confirm the validity and reliability of the scoring method.

The participants in the study were 24 classroom teachers and 690 students in grades two through five. Teachers and students were evenly distributed among the six language arts classes per grade level. Two language arts classes per grade were randomly selected to serve as treatment groups. The remaining language arts classes (i. e., four per grade level) were designated to serve as the comparison group. Students were predominantly white and evenly distributed by sex. The students were from mid to upper income bracket homes.

The following is a description of the method and results associated with efforts to select and adapt a writing assessment procedure for use in the foregoing research endeavor. Efforts are made to present the methodology in a fashion that will allow other researchers to select and adapt writing assessment procedures that are appropriate for their own research endeavors. Attempts are also made to highlight aspects of this study that have implications for efforts to improve student writing in general.

METHOD

The initial step in selecting a writing assessment procedure involved a more thorough review of the literature related to the four procedures selected for consideration. The characteristics of the procedures were outlined and presented to a selection committee consisting of district and school based experts including staff from research and evaluation (n=2), test development (n=2), elementary curriculum (n=3), language arts (n=2), early childhood (n=1), and classroom teachers (n=5). The complexity of providing valid, reliable, and useful information about what students know and can do in the area of writing was of major concern to the committee. For this reason the criteria considered by the committee included: (1) ease of scoring, (2) provision of specific feedback, (3) training requirements, and (4) scoring metric. The decision was made to select the assessment procedure which met, or could be adapted to meet these criteria.

Based on research results by NAEP (1980) and district-level research in grades 7, 9, and 11 (Cascone and Cullen, 1985), an adaptation of the primary trait system (PTS) was the procedure selected. It contained elements deemed necessary: (1) it allowed for a more narrow focus than a holistic scoring procedure; (2) the scoring guide clearly defined what was and was not being assessed; (3) samples of well-planned training sessions were available in the literature; (4) most committee members were somewhat familiar with PTS; and (5) like holistic scoring, PTS

provided a reliable ranking of essays and tended to meet the technical requirement of norm-referenced testing.

It was decided to adapt the PTS system and measure three traits at each grade level all of which would be scored at one sitting. Traits included were: (1) primary trait--mode (i.e., description), (2) secondary trait--organization appropriate to grade level (i.e., main idea, supporting details, and closure), and (3) tertiary trait--grammar and mechanics appropriate to grade level. The descriptive mode was selected because students were familiar with this particular type of writing and had some experience in using it. The secondary trait, organization, was selected because teachers felt that each composition should reflect a format being stressed at all grade levels. Finally, it was felt that a minimum of grammar and mechanics should be assessed as a tertiary trait. It was also determined that both pre and post assessment papers would be scored at the same time.

The next task involved the development of a writing prompt for each grade level. Since it was decided to use the same prompt for both pre and post assessments, only one prompt per grade level was developed. Staff from the school district's test development and language arts department collaborated in the development of the prompts. The prompts (see Appendix A) were then reviewed and approved by classroom teachers not involved in the assessment.

Grade-appropriate writing prompts were administered to students who were given 20 minutes to prepare a written response. The prompts were administered at the beginning of the school year and again following 20 weeks of instruction.

When the assessment was completed, staff from test development and research and evaluation departments read papers selected at random, ranked them according to performance, and selected anchor papers from which to develop scoring guides for each grade level. Scoring guides were also derived, in part, from a scale that referenced basic text components used by classroom teachers (see Appendix B).

The scoring guide contained four levels or points. Level four represented very good performance; level three, competent performance; level two, marginal performance; and level one, little evidence of performance. Since three traits were to be assessed by two readers, there were 24 possible points for each paper (i.e., 4 points maximum score x 3 traits x 2 readings per paper = 24 possible points). Each guide contained a statement of the traits to be measured and an interpretation of how these traits were to be scored. Before the guides were completed, teachers were interviewed and encouraged to give input as to what should be included on the scoring guide.

The committee agreed that a critical component of the scoring system was to insure that scoring criteria were understood by all; therefore, a cadre of eight district-level staff who had been involved in the development of the scoring

guides was selected to train the scorers. The cadre met and developed procedures to be employed in the training of scorers. Two members were assigned to each grade level. Training packets consisting of the writing prompt, the scoring guide, and sample papers of different levels were assembled.

The scoring of papers was carried out in the spring during a teacher's planning day. Readers included teachers involved in the actual assessment and district-level volunteers for a total of eight scorers per grade level. Readers were randomly assigned to one of four grade levels. They were then separated by groups and trained to score papers by applying the scoring guides to increasingly difficult sets of papers. As training progressed, the scoring guides were modified slightly so as to reflect group interpretations of trait descriptions. Scorers continued with training until there was consensus as to the interpretation of each trait. It was also requisite that trainers felt there was no misunderstanding among the group concerning the guide. Once trained, each reader was given a set of approximately 25 papers to score. Each paper was scored twice. Any paper which received a trait score that differed by more than one score point was re-scored by the third reader. After a reader's set of papers had been scored, another was provided until all papers had been scored twice.

Verification of the validity and reliability of the writing assessment procedure was included as a component in the research. The validity of the scoring system was confirmed through the

judgment of content experts and by correlating obtained scores with relevant indices of verbal and language ability. The reliability was determined by computing estimates of interrater agreement. Agreement indices were obtained by correlating corresponding ratings awarded by rater pairs.

RESULTS

The review of literature revealed four writing assessment procedures that were considered appropriate for use in the proposed study. These included analytic, holistic, focused holistic, and primary trait. The selection committee reviewed outlines of these procedures and deemed the NAEP Primary Trait System (PTS) most closely matched to the needs of the study and subsequent teacher usage. PTS was then adapted to assess the quality of writing traits by elementary school students : mode (primary trait) , organization (secondary trait), and mechanics/grammar (tertiary trait). Descriptors and associated point values were delineated for each trait (see Appendix B).

Results of the expert opinion study revealed the descriptors and associated point values in PTS were appropriately matched with the writing traits measured by the procedure. The experts were also in agreement that the traits and associated descriptors provided an appropriate measure of the qualities of written passages elicited by the writing prompts employed.

Analysis of the writing assessment trait ratings revealed a high level of interrater agreement. The correlations between trait ratings awarded to papers written at Time 1 ranged from a low of .55 to a high of .80. All interrater correlation coefficients were statistically significant at the .01 alpha level.

Papers which had trait discrepancies of more than one point were re-scored by a third reader to ensure that they were scored as reliably as possible. Of 292 papers scored at grade two, 15 (5.13%) required re-scoring. At grade three, 284 papers were scored; 11 (3.8%) required re-scoring. At grade four, 324 papers were scored; 17 (5.25%) required re-scoring. At grade five, 200 papers were scored; 12 (6%) required re-scoring. Of the total of 1100 papers a total of 55 (5%) required re-scoring.

The Time 1 and Time 2 PTS scores were found to be significantly correlated with verbal and language subtests of the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT). The correlation coefficients between the Time 1 writing assessment scores and the total language scores in grades four and five were .48 and .58 respectively. The correlation coefficients between the Time 2 writing assessment scores and the total language scores at grades three, four, and five were .47, .50, and .49 respectively. Each of these correlation coefficients was statistically significant at the .01 alpha level. Finally, the classroom teachers who participated in the work sessions during the project year have

adapted some of the concepts of PTS for assessing classroom writing production.

SUMMARY

Although there have been many advances in the measurement of writing in recent years, much writing assessment is still measured by means of norm-referenced testing of usage and mechanics. Many researchers and teachers feel this type of assessment does not reveal what students know and can do in writing. For this reason, the adapted PTS system met this school district's need for additional information.

Results of this study indicate that: (1) evaluators at the district level with assistance from other qualified personnel can select, adapt, and verify a writing procedure that is appropriate for use in both research and instruction; (2) a systematic procedure involving both school-based and district-level personnel can be employed to select and adapt a scoring system not only for a specific research undertaking but also for general use; and (3) the reliability and validity of the instrument can be confirmed through local research.

The adapted PTS system used was shown to be sensitive to individual differences among students within and across occasions. It was also found to provide reliable and valid information about student differences by trait and across traits. The adapted PTS system was not too involved for practical applications, yet it provided enough information to serve as a research tool. District-level personnel were able to make

inferences concerning the efficacy of the district elementary writing program, and teachers were able to use the data for assessing their students. Finally, since this procedure has been found to be reliable and valid for students in grades two through five, there is a real possibility that it can be expanded to district-wide assessment, especially at selected grade levels.

APPENDIX A

GRADE 2: COMPOSITION SCORING GUIDE

PRIMARY TRAIT: Description of a pet the writer has or would like to have.

Score Value	DESCRIPTION
4 =	Contains a high degree of description. Reader can visualize the animal through the description.
3 =	Contains descriptive details yet lacks elaboration. Reader can visualize the animal through the description.
2 =	Contains some descriptive details related to the animal.
1 =	Does not contain descriptive details related to the animal.

SECONDARY TRAIT: Topic sentence or statement of main idea; at least two supporting details; a sense of closure.

Score Value	DESCRIPTION
4 =	Contains a topic sentence or main idea and at least two supporting details; does not contain irrelevant information; contains a sense of closure.
3 =	Contains a topic sentence or main idea and at least two supporting details; does not contain irrelevant information.
2 =	Contains a topic sentence or main idea and at least two supporting details; may contain irrelevant details.
1 =	Contains no topic sentence or main idea. Titles do not count as a main idea.

TERTIARY TRAIT: Proper use of grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Score Value	DESCRIPTION
4 =	No consistent errors in grammar, spelling, or punctuation.
3 =	Consistent errors in one of the areas listed, i.e., grammar, spelling, or punctuation.
2 =	Consistent errors in two of the areas listed, i.e., grammar, spelling, or punctuation.
1 =	Consistent errors in all areas listed, i.e., grammar, spelling, or punctuation.

TERTIARY TRAIT SCORING DIMENSION
GRADE 2

The following are dimensions to be scored for grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

GRAMMAR:	(1) Complete sentences (fragments and run-ons are considered to be incorrect usage). (2) Subject/verb agreement.
SPELLING:	Correct spelling (incorrect use of the ampersand (&) for "and" is considered to be an error).
PUNCTUATION:	(1) Capitalization of first word in a sentence and proper nouns. (2) End punctuation. (3) Indention for a paragraph. (4) Apostrophes for contractions.

GRADE 3: COMPOSITION SCORING GUIDE

PRIMARY TRAIT: Description of a place the writer would like to visit on a weekend.

Score Value	DESCRIPTION
4 =	Contains sensory detail throughout. Papers may exhibit the use of figurative language.
3 =	Describes a single place using some degree of sensory detail. Paper may have details that are not strictly descriptive in nature.
2 =	Names where the writer likes to go and specifically explains what the writer does there and/or why the writer likes the place he has chosen.
1 =	Contains no specific focus on a single place. Instead, this paper may name several activities that the writer enjoys. This paper may contain description, but the description will not be about a specific place.

SECONDARY TRAIT: Organization of the information.

Score Value	DESCRIPTION
4 =	Contains a topic sentence or statement of the main idea other than in title form. Has a variety of supporting ideas. Contains only information which is relevant to the stated topic sentence. Information is organized in a logical order and the paper has a sense of closure.
3 =	Contains the elements of 4 except that the paper will contain irrelevant information which does not directly support the topic sentence.
2 =	Contains the elements of 3 except that the writer will repeat the same basic supporting detail in different words rather than give new support to the topic sentence. However, this paper will have at least two different supporting ideas.
1 =	Contains no topic sentence or statement of main idea and/or has less than two different ideas which directly support the topic sentence.

TERTIARY TRAIT: Proper use of grammar, spelling, and punctuation (see attached sheet).

Score Value	DESCRIPTION
4 =	No consistent errors in grammar, spelling, or punctuation.
3 =	Consistent errors in two of the areas listed, i.e., grammar, spelling, or punctuation.
2 =	Consistent errors in two of the areas listed, i.e., grammar, spelling, or punctuation.
1 =	Consistent errors in all areas listed, i.e., grammar, spelling, or punctuation.

TERTIARY TRAIT SCORING DIMENSIONS
GRADE 3

The following are dimensions to be scored for grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

GRAMMAR: (1) Complete sentences (fragments and run-ons are considered to be incorrect usage). (2) Subject/verb agreement.

SPELLING: Correct spelling of words appropriate to grade level.

PUNCTUATION: (2) Capitalization of first word in a sentence as the student constructs it regardless of whether the sentence is a fragment or a run-on. Capitalization of proper nouns. (2) Appropriate end punctuation. (3) Indention for a paragraph. (4) Correct use of apostrophes for contractions.

GRADE 4: COMPOSITION SCORING GUIDE

PRIMARY TRAIT: Description of the writer's best friend and what he/she is like.

Score Value	DESCRIPTION
4 =	Contains vivid description. Reader can visualize what best friend is like and tell something about his/her personality.
3 =	Contains descriptive details. Reader can tell something about the friend.
2 =	Contains some descriptive details related to the writer's best friend.
1 =	Does not contain descriptive details related to the writer's best friend.

SECONDARY TRAIT: Main idea stated. Details relate to topic. Contains at least three sentences.

Score Value	DESCRIPTION
4 =	Main idea clearly stated. Details relate to topic. Contains three sentences. Contains closure.
3 =	Main idea stated. Details relate to topic. Contains at least three sentences.
2 =	Main idea may not be stated but details relate to the assigned topic. Contains at least two sentences. May not contain definite ending.
1 =	Contains no main idea or related details.

TERTIARY TRAIT: Proper use of grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Score Value	DESCRIPTION
4 =	No consistent errors in grammar, spelling, or punctuation. A single violation in any of these areas is not considered a consistent error.
3 =	Consistent errors in one of the areas listed, i.e., grammar, spelling, or punctuation.
2 =	Consistent errors in two of the areas listed, i.e., grammar, spelling, or punctuation.
1 =	Consistent errors in all areas listed, i.e., grammar, spelling, or punctuation.

TERTIARY TRAIT SCORING DIMENSIONS
GRADE 4

The following are dimensions to be scored for grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

GRAMMAR: (1) Complete sentences (fragments and run-ons are considered to be incorrect usage). (2) Subject/ verb agreement.

SPELLING: Correct spelling (incorrect use of the ampersand (&) for "and" is considered to be an error.

PUNCTUATION: (1) Capitalization of first word in a sentence and proper nouns. (2) End punctuation. (3) Indention for a paragraph. (4) Apostrophes for contractions. (5) Commas for direct address and items in a seris.

GRADE 5: COMPOSITION SCORING GUIDE

PRIMARY TRAIT: Description of what the writer would do if given $100.

Score Value	DESCRIPTION
4 =	Contains vivid description. Contains varied sentence structure. Reader can visualize the results or actions through the description.
3 =	Contains descriptive details, yet lacks elaboration. Reader can visualize the results through the description (the way the money was spent).
2 =	Contains some descriptive details related to the results or actions taken.
1 =	Does not contain descriptive details related to the results or actions taken.

SECONDARY TRAIT: Organizational skills.

Score Value	DESCRIPTION
4 =	Subject matter well organized. Main idea clearly stated. Details relate to topic. Evidence of transitional words or phrases. Contains at least three sentences. Comes to an identifiable logical ending.
3 =	Subject matter organized. Main idea stated. Details relate to topic. Contains at least two sentences. May not contain definite ending.
2 =	Main idea may not be stated but details relate to the assigned topic. Contains at least two sentences. May not contain definite ending.
1 =	Contains no main idea or related details.

TERTIARY TRAIT: Proper use of grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Score Value	DESCRIPTION
4 =	No consistent errors in grammar, spelling, or punctuation. A single violation in any of these areas is not considered a consistent error.
3 =	Consistent errors in one of the areas listed, i.e., grammar, spelling, or punctuation.
2 =	Consistent errors in two of the areas listed, i.e., grammar, spelling, or punctuation.
1 =	Consistent errors in all areas listed, i.e., grammar, spelling, or punctuation.

TERTIARY TRAIT SCORING DIMENSIONS
GRADE 5

The following are dimensions to be scored for grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

GRAMMAR: (1) Complete sentences (fragments and run-ons are considered to be incorrect usage). (2) Subject/verb agreement. (3) Consistency of tense. (4) Pronoun usage.

SPELLING: Correct spelling (incorrect use of the ampersand (&) for "and" is considered to be an error).

PUNCTUATION: (1) Capitalization of first word in a sentence and proper nouns. (2) End punctuation. (3) Indention for a paragraph. (4) Apostrophes for possessives and contractions. (5) Commas for direct address and items in a series.

APPENDIX B

STUDENT NAME: _____

STUDENT NUMBER: _____

GRADE: 4

TEACHER: _____

DIRECTIONS:

DESCRIBE YOUR BEST FRIEND. TELL WHAT HE OR SHE IS LIKE. WRITE AT LEAST THREE SENTENCES.

WRITE YOUR SENTENCES ON THE NEXT PAGE.

* * * * * *

WAIT UNTIL YOUR TEACHER TELLS YOU TO BEGIN.

STUDENT NAME: _____

STUDENT NUMBER: _____

GRADE: 5

TEACHER: _____

DIRECTIONS:

DESCRIBE WHAT YOU WOULD DO IF YOU WERE GIVEN $100.00. WRITE AT LEAST THREE SENTENCES.

WRITE YOUR SENTENCES ON THE NEXT PAGE.

* * * * * *

WAIT UNTIL YOUR TEACHER TELLS YOU TO BEGIN.

STUDENT NAME: _____

STUDENT NUMBER: _____

GRADE: 2

TEACHER: _____

DIRECTIONS:

TELL ABOUT A PET YOU HAVE OR WOULD LIKE TO HAVE. TELL WHAT THE PET LOOKS LIKE. WRITE AT LEAST THREE SENTENCES.

WRITE YOUR SENTENCES ON THE NEXT PAGE.

* * * * * *

WAIT UNTIL YOUR TEACHER TELLS YOU TO BEGIN.

STUDENT NAME: _____

STUDENT NUMBER: _____

GRADE: 3

TEACHER: _____

DIRECTIONS:

TELL ABOUT A PLACE YOU LIKE TO GO ON A WEEK-END. USE WORDS THAT HELP THE READER SEE THE PLACE. WRITE AT LEAST THREE SENTENCES.

WRITE YOUR SENTENCES ON THE NEXT PAGE.

* * * * * *

WAIT UNTIL YOUR TEACHER TELLS YOU TO BEGIN.

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